



A LETTER
TO
SIR B. C. BRODIE, BART.
ON
THE APPLICATION
OF THE
COLLEGIATE SYSTEM
TO THE
MEDICAL SCHOOLS
OF
THE METROPOLIS.

BY THE REV. J. H. NORTH, M. A.
CHAPLAIN TO ST. GEORGE'S HOSPITAL.

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ON THE APPLICATION
OF
THE COLLEGIATE SYSTEM, &c.

MY DEAR SIR,

THE subject upon which I have undertaken to address you, seems to me of sufficient importance to claim the attention of those who are interested in the state and prospects of medical education. If I am not mistaken in this opinion, my apology for troubling you with this Letter will be found not only in the position which you occupy, but also in the anxiety which you continually manifest, to uphold the character and extend the usefulness of the medical profession. I am farther encouraged to adopt this course, by the knowledge I have, that the minds of not a few have recently been turned to the inquiry upon which I shall now, without longer preface, enter. That inquiry is, how far some application

of the collegiate system may advantageously be made to the medical schools of the metropolis.

One benefit that we have derived from recent discussions is this, that when we speak of education, it is now pretty generally understood that we do not apply the term to the few years spent at school, nor to the mere acquisition of knowledge, or skill in languages, or external accomplishments; we may now use the word without being thus misunderstood, and therefore we are the more free to introduce the consideration of some points which might seem beyond the range of the question, were we confined to the lower and more restricted notion of education to which I have alluded.

I make this remark, lest I may appear to some to be intruding into a subject which properly concerns the profession alone; lest I may be suspected of attempting the discharge of a duty which rightly devolves upon the lecturers or professors in the various schools, or of venturing to propose measures which might with more propriety emanate from some other quarter.

Were I about to speak only, or chiefly, of an attendance upon lectures and professional instruction, I might lay myself open to this charge; but my purpose is widely different, and upon these matters I shall touch only so far as they may incidentally arise.

The points, then, which come immediately within my present scope, are the comfort and the discipline of medical students ; a very large class of the youth of England, upon the character of whom must depend in no small degree the comfort of the whole community.

The life of a medical student may perhaps be well described by the word desultory. Supposing him to have left home, probably in some remote part of the country, and to have come to London solely for the purpose of professional study, not having any relatives or near connexions in the metropolis, we can hardly conceive any one in a position less comfortable, or more exposed to temptation. With few exceptions, the age at which he comes to London is, I believe, nearly the same as that of a freshman going up to one of our universities. But what a striking difference there is in the provision made for the comfort and discipline of the young student in the two cases ! I will briefly exhibit the contrast. As soon as a man goes up to Cambridge, (I speak of Cambridge as having more certain knowledge of the system there pursued,) he is required to present himself before his tutor, whose authority over his pupil extends not only to his studies, but to the regulation of his hours, and nearly all the matters affecting his domestic arrangements. It is upon the point of comfort that I am

particularly speaking now. Rooms are provided either within the walls of the college, or in some house licensed for the purpose by the university, the proprietor of which is strictly answerable for his conformity to the regulations which the college issues. Dinner is provided in the hall, at which the presence of the under-graduates is not only expected but enforced ; and for the other meals, commons are dispensed in stated quantities, and at fixed prices. The bills for necessary articles incurred with the tradesmen of the town pass through the hands of the tutor, who, at the request of parents or guardians, may thus have a vigilant eye upon the expenses of those committed to his care. The rules respecting rooms, commons, furniture, and other matters of this kind, are sufficient to ensure the comfort of all who are disposed to avail themselves of the help which is thus afforded them. That these rules may be evaded, that in some particular instances they fail of producing all the comfort expected, these exceptions, and such as these, do not constitute any argument against the system. My assertion is this, that for a young man going up to the university, circumstances are created favourable to his comfort. The medical student has none of these advantages. There is no officer connected with the hospital at which the pupil is entered, whose

province it is to guide him in the selection of his apartments ; there are no limits within which his choice is confined ; there is no warrant for the respectability of the persons at whose house he may take up his abode ; there is no provision made for the regularity of his meals, nor for any of those arrangements upon which his comfort depends. He has to settle and arrange for himself all those household affairs, which present no slight difficulty to those who are far older and more experienced than himself. He is alone ; and solitude in London is of all things the most desolate. In these circumstances, he applies for guidance to those who, not unfrequently, are least able to render him effectual aid ; he is at least as likely to fall into bad hands as into good : it may be, a notice stuck up in the hall of the hospital catches his eye, and he takes refuge from his perplexity in the first lodging-house that presents itself ; and in this situation, unfriendly to his moral character, unfavourable to study, not admitting any superintendence, and destitute of all domestic comfort, he passes the first months, perhaps, which in the whole of his life have not been spent in the society of his family or friends.

If from this view of the condition of the medical students we turn to a somewhat different one ; if, from speaking of their comfort, we

come now to speak of their discipline, the case becomes far stronger, and one which yet more powerfully calls for some improvement. I will again recur to the situation of under-graduates in support of this part of my argument. To speak briefly, the means insisted upon to secure regularity of conduct are these : daily attendance at chapel, again at lectures, a third time at hall ; and lastly, the system of gates, by which a return of every under-graduate who is out after ten o'clock at night is daily made to the tutor or dean. The punishments for offences against these laws consist of impositions and deprivation of liberty for periods varying in length, and eventually loss of terms and consequent postponement of the degree. I am not aware that the discipline of our universities has ever been considered too severe ; nor do the tutors and deans find that they have too much power for the purpose of maintaining due attention to the necessary points of correct behaviour. Yet of all these restraints—these wholesome and necessary restraints—the life of a medical student is wholly devoid. There is, indeed, some attendance required on lectures, some in the wards of the hospital ; but, with this exception, the pupil is entirely his own master ; that is, in all matters relating to his hours, his expenses, his companions, his religious and moral habits, he is utterly

without a check; and in all the heat and inexperience of youth, he finds all London before him for the uncontrolled gratification of his favourite desires, whatever they may chance to be.

As contrasted with the member of the university, he is in a larger town, in a far more mixed society, (for, with few exceptions, gownsmen do not associate with the inhabitants of the town,) less liable to observation, (for the academic dress constitutes a mark of distinction and recognition,) exposed to greater risks in every way, while all the restraints which exist in the one case are wanting in the other. To this we may add, that the course of previous education has already prepared the school-boy for the ways of the university; already has the school afforded him a miniature (and in some instances far more than a miniature) picture of the university, so that the transition in the case of one leaving a public school is very slight. In which respect the medical student is very differently placed. Take, for example, the case of one who has been removed from school at the age of fourteen or fifteen, for the purpose of being apprenticed to a practitioner in the country; and this is, I believe, a very general course. What superintendence has been exercised here? What pains can have been bestowed upon the moral culture, or the formation of the principles and

habits of a youth thus situated, by a master whose unavoidable absence from home extends frequently to the whole of the day, and whose intercourse with his apprentice is thus necessarily confined within the limits of mere professional commands on the one side, and obedience on the other? Yet, with no other preparation than this, it is that perhaps the majority of students are sent to encounter the difficulties and temptations of a London life. A preparation surely, which by its incompleteness suggests how essential to the welfare of this class some friendly direction, some mild system of control, must be.

Now, for this state of things it does seem to me very desirable that some remedy should be devised. It is true, that some who are content with things as they are, will deny the necessity of any change, upon the ground of the high position which is held in public esteem by the members of the medical profession. They may point to the intellectual and moral qualifications of not a few who have shed lustre upon the ranks of that profession; and then may ask, whether a system which has sufficed to produce such fruits can be in any essential degree defective. I believe that the most eminent members of the profession would be among the first to acknowledge the defect which it is the object of this Letter to point out. I believe that, remembering their

own early difficulties, and the serious impediments which were in the way of their first attempts to acquire professional knowledge in a manner which should also prepare them for the other duties of their station, they would be most solicitous to remove such hindrances from the path of those who are now following their steps. But, in truth, I am not discussing what may or may not be necessary for the great and eminent, but what may be useful for the ordinary class of students. That some men are so good as not to need laws, and some so bad as not be improved by them, is no just argument against legislation. And so, that the resolutely industrious will make good progress under any system, while the incorrigibly idle will be mended by none, is no good argument against such an improvement in the mode of education as shall provide suitable aids for those who, being neither resolutely industrious nor incorrigibly idle, are likely to be assisted or hindered accordingly as the circumstances by which they are surrounded are or are not favourable to their comfort and their discipline. The remedy which I propose, then, for the evil which I have imperfectly described, and the existence of which is, I believe, fully admitted by those most competent to form a correct judgment, is simply an application, so far as may be found practicable, of the collegiate system to the great

medical schools of the metropolis. I cannot conceive upon what grounds exception can be taken to such an application. It is a measure which would be attended with no expense; for the method of introducing it might be so contrived as gradually to extend the experiment in a manner proportionate to its success. A suitable building, or range of buildings, may be purchased, rented, or erected, as the convenience of the neighbourhood may admit; and here apartments may be allotted by some duly constituted authority at a moderate rent previously fixed. This will, in all probability, not be higher than the rate at which furnished apartments are let, especially at the west end of the town; no additional burden, therefore, will be laid upon the students, while the expense incurred by building or hiring the college (for why should I not use the word?) will be reimbursed by the rents thus received. If this difficulty be once surmounted, and a suitable building be provided, all the points of internal discipline will easily be arranged; they are matters of detail, which a little patient consideration will speedily settle. In whose hands the general superintendence is to be placed, how far it may be advisable to have a common hall, and to require the presence of the pupils at dinner, what hours are to be observed, and under what penalties; these and the like questions will, I think, present no serious

difficulty, if it be once decided that the general outline of the plan is to be adopted, and if the execution of it be committed to those in whose judgment and experience confidence may be reposed. I have already alluded to the interest which this proposition has excited among several members of the profession. But with the public, of course, must be left the decision whether or no this attempt to amend the condition of medical students shall be made. Nor, I may be permitted to say, do I think that there is any portion of the public to whom the question is of deeper interest than to the Governors of St. George's Hospital; to whom, then, can this appeal be more properly made? The situation of our hospital in a great thoroughfare, its entire dependence upon popular support, the high patronage under which it flourishes, the character which it has established, and which it is concerned to maintain, all combine to mark the propriety of its taking the lead in a change which cannot, I think, fail of being most beneficial to those who are now in course of training, and who shall hereafter be trained in the school of Hunter and of Baillie, and of others yet living, for that profession which these eminent men adorned. And if beneficial to the students, this change will scarcely be less so to the Institution itself. For how powerfully do the conversation, conduct, and

habits of life of the students who throng the wards of the hospital, how powerfully must they act upon the nurses and servants, and (though somewhat less directly) upon the patients within the walls ! Indeed, the indirect advantages which would in all probability arise from having a body of pupils, whose persons were well known, whose characters were observed, whose excesses were animadverted upon, whose regularity was encouraged ; I say, the indirect advantages probably to be derived from a body of students thus disciplined are so numerous as to suggest the propriety of abstaining from further discussion of them, lest I trespass at too great length upon your valuable time. I trust I have said enough to draw the earnest attention of yourself and other influential Governors of St. George's to a subject of great moment. The change which I have now feebly advocated is, I conceive, not only practicable, but easy ; it will not be attended eventually with expense or risk of any kind ; and the issue of it, I believe I am not too sanguine in hoping, would be a real improvement in the comfort and discipline, that is, in the education of men, to whom, if well trained, we may confidently look for the promotion not only of the physical, but also of the moral welfare of all classes of society. I am sure even the wish to advance such a cause will be sufficient excuse

for my having intruded upon your notice ; and, thanking you for the kindness with which you have afforded me this opportunity of discussing the question,

I remain, my dear Sir,

Yours very faithfully,

J. H. NORTH.

To Sir B. C. Brodrie, Bart. &c. &c.

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